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SUBJECT: KOREA BEGINS TO SEE THE LIGHT ON UNDERGROUND
PROSTITUTION

SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

¶11. (U) Representative Cho Bae sook, Chairperson of the Culture and Tourism Committee, co-hosted a seminar at the National Assembly on March 20 to discuss the evolution of the prostitution industry in Korea. The other host of the event was the Dasi-Hamkke Center (Together Again Center), a large NGO that provides shelter and support for victims of prostitution and human trafficking. In addition to the two keynote speakers from the Center, a panel of eight officials from local and national government shared their insights into the changing nature of the prostitution industry in Korea. The panel included members from the National Assembly, National Police, Chief Prosecutor's office, Ministry of Communication and others. The ROKG has recently cracked down on advertising used by underground prostitution venues, an area which falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, as one way to root out the growing problem of underground sex trade.

¶12. (U) Korea passed sweeping anti-prostitution legislation in 2004 that made all forms of prostitution illegal. Soon after the law was passed, police initiated several prolonged crackdowns in an initial effort to curb the prostitution industry that was a widely accepted behind-the-scenes part of Korean society. As NGOs and ROKG Ministries combined their public awareness efforts, public perception of prostitution slowly began to change and people began to understand the negative effects it can have on society. As pressure against the prostitution industry mounted, brothel owners began to shift their work to alternate venues such as massage parlors, barber shops and singing rooms although a few traditional red-light districts continue to operate. The Internet also became a popular method to arrange sexual encounters because it provided protection for business owners who wanted to keep a low profile. As the prostitution industry in Korea continued to move underground, the ROKG was trying to keep pace with its legislation and law enforcement tactics. END
SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: CHO JIN-KYUNG, DASI-HAMKKE CENTER

¶13. (U) Under the theme of "Revealing Prostitution in People's Everyday Lives," the keynote speaker, Cho Jin-kyung,

Director of Dasi-Hamkke Center, shared specific examples of how prostitution had permeated into the daily lives of ordinary citizens and how the industry was regulated. Current regulation efforts are centered on the business aspects of the industry. Stricter regulation of advertising and issuance of business licenses were the first steps in putting pressure on underground prostitution rings.

¶ 14. (U) Director Cho summarized the findings of a research project her organization conducted to find out how widespread prostitution was in residential areas. The research showed that prostitution in residential areas was prevalent in both urban and rural areas. Urban areas had more large-size, high-end venues for prostitution like large "room-salons" and massage parlors that grew into established businesses. One recent trend was for prostitution businesses to use incorrectly spelled words on their sign boards to indicate that the business provides a "different" service. In rural areas, underground prostitution businesses tended to be more small-sized, low-end coffee shops or music bars (norae bang), often with connections to a neighboring motel.

¶ 15. (U) Countless websites and exchanges of information relating to prostitution were found on the Internet, ranging from advertisements to lure women into the business to reviews by customers who frequented these underground brothels. Cho noted the remarkable adaptability of the prostitution industry to suit people's daily lives compared to the ineffectiveness of current regulations. She called for stronger administrative action (fines, orders or other actions levied by the local government for breach of local ordinances), more police crackdowns and further clarification of the provisions in the law.

SPEAKER 2: CHO MIN-YOUNG, DASI-HAMKKE CENTER

¶ 16. (U) Cho Min-young, Legal Counsel of the Dasi-Hamkke Center, discussed the legal regulations pertaining to the two neighborhoods where the Center conducted its fact-finding survey described in para. 4. The study compared the number of legal violations committed by quasi-prostitution businesses (businesses that primarily provide a legitimate business service with prostitution as a secondary business) and the corresponding administrative actions that were imposed. Some of the administrative actions taken against the businesses included warnings and fines (for poor bookkeeping, brokering prostitution and admitting juveniles to the premises), correction orders (for "misleading signboards, unauthorized changes in the layout of the building and noncompliance with fire codes), suspension of business and cancellation of business permits (for operating outside of their original business category, operating a massage parlor without a license and engaging in lewd or indecent business). Cho concluded that although the current laws included provisions for administrative actions against quasi-prostitution venues, they were often too vague or ambiguous to be applied effectively while other provisions were simply not enforced.

PANEL DISCUSSION

¶ 17. (U) Prosecutor Kang Ji-sik from the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office suggested that the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) implement stronger administrative controls on real estate. For example, some prostitution businesses are closed down only to reopen in the same location under a new name. Korea should also shift from a registration-based system to a permission-based system for those business types that are now synonymous with underground prostitution. Kang also suggested that the MOJ provide more compensation for informants in an effort to root out more underground businesses.

¶8. (U) Director General Kwon Yong-hyun from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF) suggested that Korea needed to establish a legal framework to regulate quasi-prostitution businesses whereas there are currently very few legal channels to pursue. Kwon recommended stronger punishment of building owners who knowingly allow prostitution to occur on the property. Finally, Kwon urged the central government to be harsher in its assessment of local government's regulatory practices for underground businesses.

¶9. (U) Team Director Park Soon-tae from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism said his Ministry had championed efforts since late 2006 to prevent "norae bang" (singing rooms) from turning into quasi-prostitution venues. The Ministry promoted legislation that prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages and prohibited the employment of "waitresses" who worked as prostitutes.

¶10. (U) Director Seo Jae-yul from the Seoul Metropolitan City Government reported the number of crackdowns on entertainment businesses: 85 bars, 87 singing bars, 132 lodging facilities, 172 barber shops and 2 massage parlors were subject to administrative actions between 2004 and 2006.

Seo highlighted several challenges that police face when carrying out crackdowns; ineffectiveness due to the secret nature of the prostitution industry, jurisdiction limitations of local government officials, weak punishment and legal loopholes.

¶11. (U) Researcher Yun Deok-kyung from the Korean Women's Development Institute highlighted the difficulty in providing evidence of prostitution at quasi-prostitution venues. Yun questioned the effectiveness of administrative actions and pointed out that only a small number of cases were actually prosecuted. Yun recognized that "whistle-blowers" play the most effective role in cracking down on prostitution, but remained skeptical of how many of those cases booked for investigation through an insider's tip actually resulted in indictments and punishment.

¶12. (U) Women and Youth Team Director Lee Geum-hyung from the Korean National Police Agency argued that, unlike what many call a "balloon effect" (as the prostitution industry is constricted in Korea, prostitutes move to other countries with less law enforcement pressure) it was unfair to blame the Anti-Prostitution Act of 2004 as the root cause of quasi-prostitution activities. Since the law was enacted in 2004, crackdowns on quasi-prostitution venues far outnumbered those on traditional red-light districts (44 percent to 4 percent, respectively). Lee also highlighted the growing number of victims who utilized the National Police Agency's 117 hotline (1,012 in 2004; 1,679 in 2005; 2,595 in 2006). Through this hotline, 598 victims were rescued and 2,187 pimps or business owners providing prostitution services were booked for investigation. She expressed concern about the sharp increase in the use of the Internet as a channel to lure juveniles into prostitution. Since the enactment of the Anti-Prostitution Act in 2004, 590 out of 744 cases, or 79 percent of juvenile prostitution cases, were brokered through the Internet.

¶13. (U) Rep. Hong Mi-young, a member of the Uri Party and the National Assembly Women's Affairs Committee, laid out her plans to initiate bills to revise the law on preventing prostitution and protecting victims. Specifically, Hong proposed to amend the following laws:

--Act on the Prevention of Prostitution and Protection of Victims: Add a new clause on administrative actions so that local governments would have more power to order the closure of businesses providing prostitution services.

--Act on the Punishment of Prostitution Brokerage: Add a new clause that would enable officials to subject business owners to punishment when they have repeated violations.

--Building Act: Add a new clause that subjects a business to administrative action if they illegally remodel a building for the purpose of engaging in prostitution.

--Public Health Management Act: Add a clause that would include prostitution brokerage as the grounds for business closure and extend the period of business suspension when found to have continued operating a business after issuance of a closure order.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) The ROKG is finally beginning to devote more time and resources to better address the changing nature of the prostitution industry in Korea. Recognizing that the industry has long since adapted to the 2004 laws, Korean lawmakers are scrambling to find better ways to update and enforce the existing laws. Although many in Korea cite the notion of a "balloon effect" of prostitutes leaving Korea for other countries, this is not to say that the prostitution industry is shrinking considerably in Korea. While many of the initiatives discussed at the conference appear to be effective methods for limiting the supply of prostitution, there was little discussion about how to address the demand.

¶15. (SBU) Park Hyun-sook of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family told poloff that in 2004, only 30 percent of the population knew that prostitution was illegal while today the number is 93 percent. A serious debate on the issue erupted late last year as MOGEF introduced a plan where men would be paid if they promised not to engage in prostitution as part of the traditional end-of-year parties hosted by their employers. Many men were angered that the Ministry continued to perpetuate the idea that most men still engage in prostitution. The plan was quickly halted but not before the media in Korea and abroad highlighted the incident as part of a larger problem in Korea. Any long-term plan that will effectively reduce the size of the prostitution problem in Korea will need to include programs to change the way Koreans view buying and selling sex.

VERSHBOW